

**ENGLISH 740-01:
STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY AND POSTMODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE
(3.0 CR.)**

The Recent American Novel and the Object of Fiction (3 CR.).

Professor Christian Moraru
Spring 2022
MHRA 1304
T 3:30 - 6:20 PM
Face to Face

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS: This is a graduate seminar that focuses on recent American fiction, principally on the novel of what some of us have been calling the (“new”) contemporary period. In our class, we will address in detail the fluid, geocultural and historical dynamic of the contemporary and the postmodern. We will examine how, stylistically, thematically, and historically, postmodernism gradually has been fading away and contemporaneity has come to designate the decades after the Cold War or, according to some critics, even the interval since September 11, 2001. Understood as a period, then, contemporaneity is postmillennial. Moving beyond periodization, our class will deal with a distinguishing thematic and stylistic feature of this body of work, namely, with its profound interest in material environments, more specifically, in the world of objects as loosely and sometimes controversially defined by Object-Oriented Ontology.

The context of this largely post-postmodern turn to “objectualism,” or to the reality of surrounding objects, is, on both sides of the Atlantic, the spread of what I define as an art of hyperpresence. In polemical response to both postmodernism’s ironic, intertextually deferred mediation of the world and to the “post-truth” era of counterfactual relativism and populist demagoguery, this art zeroes in, simply speaking, on that which asserts itself as powerfully and shockingly present, incontrovertibly *here*, “in your face,” and more often than not in the modality of a deep crisis. This art—an art of what *is*—sets out to capture what is “true” and undeniably so in its raw, palpable existence, be it a historical event, a scientifically proven fact, a result of national elections, an environmental phenomenon, a rock, or a tool, especially as they undergo some kind of breakdown or emergency, do not work as they used to, or fail to perform a vital function. This is when what is swings into overwhelming presence, when it steps forward and calls on us, alerting us to its being-there rather than “withdrawing,” as some speculative realists posit.

These all are, as the same thinkers would insist, “objects” that proclaim their presence or truthfulness independent of the human subject’s ability to represent, interpret, and otherwise

rationalize such entities' existence and meaning through discourse. Therefore, this swing into self-presentation of an entire world or worlds, rather, is also a symptom, among so many, of the crisis of humanism and its anthropocentric worldview. However, this crisis bodes well, some say, as an opportunity to evaluate and self-evaluate and possibly for a post- or non-human decentering of modern ontology, as it does for a more democratic, less hierarchical—and therefore “flat”—aesthetics for which the human is also just one object among countless others. Defining the contemporary, this flat aesthetics' forays into literature and the arts call for a new reading mode. Our class is one possible response to this call.

Novelists discussed include Ben Lerner, Kayte Nunn, Michael Chabon, Emily St. John Mandel, Colson Whitehead, and Xhenet Aliu. We will also read quite a bit of theory by Graham Harman and other “speculative realists.” This course has a strong professional development component, with emphasis on advanced research, graduate writing, and publication. Individual presentations; midterm (5-6-p.) and final (20-p.+) papers.

OFFICIAL UNCG COVID-19 POLICIES: As we return for spring 2022, all students, faculty, and staff are required to uphold UNCG's culture of care by actively engaging in behaviors that limit the spread of COVID-19. These actions include, but are not limited to:

- Following face-covering guidelines
- Engaging in proper hand-washing hygiene
- Self-monitoring for symptoms of COVID-19
- Staying home when ill
- Complying with directions from health care providers or public health officials to quarantine or isolate if ill or exposed to someone who is ill
- Completing a self-report when experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, testing positive for COVID-19, or being identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive
- Staying informed about the University's policies and announcements via the COVID-19 website

Instructors will have seating charts for their classes. These are important for facilitating contact tracing should there be a confirmed case of COVID-19. Students must sit in their assigned seats at every class meeting. Students may move their chairs in class to facilitate group work, as long as instructors keep seating chart records. Students should not eat or drink during class time.

A limited number of disposable masks will be available in classrooms for students who have forgotten theirs. Face coverings are also available for purchase in the UNCG Campus Bookstore. Students who do not follow masking requirements will be asked to put on a face covering or leave the classroom to retrieve one and only return when they follow the basic standards of safety and care for the UNCG community. Once students have a face covering, they are permitted to re-enter a class already in progress. Repeated issues may result in conduct action.

The course policies regarding attendance and academics remain in effect for partial or full absence from class due to lack of adherence with face covering and other requirements. For instances where the Office of Accessibility Resources and Services (OARS) has granted accommodations regarding wearing face coverings, students should contact their instructors to develop appropriate alternatives to class participation and/or activities as needed. Instructors or

the student may also contact OARS (336.334.5440) who, in consultation with Student Health services, will review requests for accommodations.

PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY AND CLASS FORMAT: Running for almost three hours, this class will resemble a seminar. It will combine lecture, extensive discussion, student presentations, and group work. Usually, our meetings will open with a lecture by the instructor providing historical and cultural background and placing the scheduled readings in the appropriate context. Following this introduction, students give 15-20-minute individual presentations on specific aspects of those readings. Then, we discuss collectively (sometimes in groups) the materials for the day. I will set aside time to prepare and evaluate writing projects, presentations, etc.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES: Graduate students are encouraged to use this course to put their work in the larger, more demanding and competitive perspective of professionalism and academic performance. The class is geared toward graduate reading and writing carrying potential for publication and presentation outside UNCG. While fulfilling the course's requirements is your main goal, I urge you to take these requirements as an opportunity to think about yourselves as part of the academic community, with its standards, language, methods, tools, and venues. Here are a few questions for us: where do I stand as a scholar, teacher, critic, and writer, and which are my goals? How is my writing? Is it what it should be? What is or will be my audience? In what kind of scholarly conversation do I wish to intervene based on what I learn here? What steps do I have to take to do that? What are the available resources? Which are the outlets for my work? What do I have to do, for instance, to turn my seminar presentation/paper into a conference paper/journal article/dissertation chapter/writing sample?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Oral participation—individually, in groups, and during class discussion—is expected.
2. Individual presentations on the materials for the day. Guidelines for presentations: Students sign up for their final project and oral presentations right away so that we can spread out the presentations over the course of the semester. Each student will give a brief, **15-20-min.** talk on the scheduled readings. The presentations need not be written. Presentations cover a relevant aspect or material for the day. I do not expect you to fully analyze or explain the assignments or even one of these assignments. I ask you to a) briefly outline the argument or content of the readings you intend to talk about; b) identify one major element or theoretical problem in these works, which should help us open up our conversation. Feel free to consult with me before you pick your presentation topic.
3. Final Project Presentation: Each student will give a **10-15-min.** presentation on his or her final paper (see syllabus, last weeks).
4. Papers: a **midterm** (7-8 pp. max., including notes and Works Cited) and a **final paper** (20 pp. min. plus notes and Works Cited). The final paper may expand the midterm if the latter has been particularly successful. Both essays must be thesis-based and incorporate research. They will be

Word documents (MLA or Chicago) submitted by e-mail. **All papers are WORD DOCUMENTS and must be submitted by e-mail at c_moraru@uncg.edu**

5. Attendance and Participation. Both are expected and will factor into the final grade (see below under course policies).

CONFERENCES: Please meet with me during my regular office hours or make an appointment to discuss your specific interests, goals, or any aspect of this class. We will also talk about your plans for the final project.

COURSE POLICIES:

1. Late Papers: No late papers—and any other kind of late work for that matter—accepted. However, if you foresee any deadline-related problems, please come to see me ahead of time. We shall work together to find a solution.

2. Absences: You are allowed no more than 2 (two) justified absences during the semester for illnesses (which you must document afterwards), religious holidays, or emergencies preventing you from attending. No undocumented absences allowed. Should they occur, they will affect your final grade. I will subtract 5% from the latter for any undocumented absence. Since we meet once a week, attendance is particularly critical to the success of your work. If you are the victim of an emergency, please stay in touch with me by e-mail or phone.

GRADING: As a general rule, no incompletes (but come to see me if you anticipate any problems). The quality of your work will be reflected in the final grade as follows:

1. Papers: 80%
2. Oral participation (includes group work and presentations): 20%

REQUIRED READINGS (latest paperbacks):

Primary Sources:

1. Nunn, Kayte. *The Botanist's Daughter*. London: Orion, 2019.
2. Lerner, Ben. *10:04*. New York: Picador, 2014.
3. Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. New York: Knopf, 2015
4. Whitehead, Colson. *Zone One*. New York: Anchor Books, 2012.
5. Aliu, Xhenet. *Brass*. New York: Random House, 2019.
6. Chabon, Michael. *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Theory and Criticism:

1. Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

2. Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.
3. Bryant, Levi R. *The Democracy of Objects*. Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011.
4. Harman, Graham. *Speculative Realism: An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018.
5. Shaviro, Steven. *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

WEEKLY SYLLABUS:

Note: All assignments are due in class under the day indicated in the syllabus. Also, unless page numbers are indicated, books are due in their entirety on the first day they are scheduled.

Week 1

T 01/11 Introduction to the course: topics, scope, structure, format, requirements.
 Planning ahead, getting organized: individual presentations and conferences;
 discussion groups
Individual presentations (sign-up)
 Introductory lecture: The Object of Fiction in Recent U. S. Literature

Week 2

T 01/18 Bogost 1-84

Week 3

T 01/25 *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection*
 Bogost 85-end

Week 4

T 02/01 Harman 1-90
 Continue discussion of Chabon (ctd.)

Week 5

T 02/08 *Station Eleven*
Discussing the midterm paper: intervening in the debate

Week 6

T 02/15 Harman 90-end
 Mandel ctd.

Week 7

T 02/22 Shaviro 1-84

Week 8

T 03/01 *10:04*

Week 9

T 03/08 **Spring break: no class**

Week 10

T 03/15 *10:04* ctd.
Shaviro 85-end
Midterm paper due in class
Final project presentations (sign-up)

Week 11

T 03/22 *Zone One*

Week 12

T 03/29 *Zone One* ctd.
Bennett 1-81

Week 13

T 04/05 *Brass*
Bennett-end
Presentations, final project

Week 14

T 04/12 Bryant 1-134
Presentations, final project

Week 15

T 04/19 *The Botanist's Daughter*
Bryant-end

Week 16

T 04/26 Final meeting
The Botanist's Daughter ctd.
Presentations, final project
Overview
Final papers due in class